<Book Reviews> Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Market, Media, and Rights. PETER A. JACKSON, ed. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, xi+308p.

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their effectiveness, or how far Thais are aware of them. The book's main weakness is that it is written from an outsider's perspective, with very few insights into how the city is read by its residents. Disappointingly, King dismisses the slum as a screened world, where informality masks the organization and exploitation of poverty. Where he acknowledges social dynamism, it is through the eyes of activists, rather than dwellers. Yet, research on slums and informal settlements in Southeast Asia and beyond has shown how the residents are often able to contest official policies and chronic hazards on an everyday basis, albeit in passive ways (see Roy and AlSayyad 2004; Bankoff 2003; Guinness 2009; Akin 1975; Jellinek 1991). A social history of the slum—and, in more general terms, of Bangkok—is missing from the book. This paints the capital in an overly harsh, unflattering light. The same problem applies to King's conclusion that Thai intellectuals are steeped in self-censorship because they do not voice their opinions within classroom.

To be fair, King acknowledges the limitations of his sources and his position as a foreigner; he also concedes that Thais may express intellectual contention in different ways from Western students. *Reading Bangkok*, then, is also useful for how it raises unanswered questions and paves the way for future scholarship on the contested spaces of the city.

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Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Market, Media, and Rights

PETER A. JACKSON, ed.

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, xi+308 p.

The project of decentering Western experiences in theorizing the issues of gender and sexualities has led concerned scholars to consider and include the experiences of "Other," i.e., non-Western,

societies. Eve Sedgwick's dictum on the incompleteness of critical analysis of the "modern homo/heterosexual definition in Western culture" is often taken as the guiding assumption behind the impulse to understand how different the practices of gender construction in these societies may be. Thus, we have serious investigations through various interdisciplinary lens—based on historical sources, cultural practices, social norms, laws, literary texts, and media—of the ideological construction of gender and sexualities in the Asian and Pacific societies, African and Middle Eastern countries (the so-called "Islamic societies"), and the Latin America region. Within Asian societies, studies on homosexuality in China and Japan lead the pack.

By bringing non-Western experiences into focus, these studies build on the basic premise that these experiences are not only different from Western ones, but also necessitate the adoption of a polyvocal and multifocal perspective. Based on this premise, a number of proposals have been made on behalf of "homosexualities," as Stephen Murray (2003) argues in his encyclopedic account, or what Tom Boellstorff (2007) calls being "comparatively queer in Southeast Asia." While these studies have contributed to deepening our present understanding of the topic, it is worth revisiting the question of how much this critical project has really accomplished in its efforts to provide an alternative to Western experience based-theory. This rethinking is not meant to judge harshly any present and up-and-coming studies of non-Western societies, but rather, to remind scholars about the challenges they continue to face in their collective effort to contribute in a meaningful way to this new academic field of study.

Queer Bangkok consists of 13 articles. In the introduction, Peter Jackson, the editor, asserts that the collection of articles offers "future directions for research" on queer Bangkok (and Thailand, in general) in the twenty-first century. He does not explain, however, how the book's early twenty-first century descriptions and proposal to go "beyond twentieth century paradigms" can lead to a better understanding of homosexuality. It is worth keeping in mind an earlier collection that dealt with the "transformation of sex/gender order in twentieth-century Thailand" with the stated aim of "deconstructing Eurocentrism" (Cook and Jackson 1999). Both collections rely on postmodern vocabularies, but offer little explanation as to how words like "diversity," "dynamism" and "transformation" actually capture the changes taking place in the everyday lives of their subject in the last two decades. They also have relatively little to say about how different the twenty-first century is from the twentieth. The term "Asian century" (p. 10) resonates only for Australian readers as a description of the economic power of its Asian neighbors in the twenty-first century. But nowhere in the book is there any attempt to examine how the "Asian century" is experienced by those living in the region itself, except from the perspective of the consumption culture of its middle classes.

Peter Jackson contributes two articles—one on the phenomenon of "queer boom" and the other on "queer autonomy" in Bangkok. Both are compelling in their propositions but unfortunately, based on highly selective evidence. Jackson points out the power of the "purple Baht" as

the Thai economy enjoyed stable growth between 2005 and 2007 (see the table on p. 21). However, this does not necessarily mean that Thais are getting richer nor that wealth is being evenly distributed across the classes (although consumer goods are, in fact, getting cheaper). Jackson does not explain the size of the middle classes in Bangkok—the main targets of the gay market. That working-class Thais are enjoying "queer autonomy" is based on their relative income—in a family setting, and against the unemployed (or earning less income) family members. However, this tells us little about how non-middle-class Thai gays define themselves, and how they constantly negotiate with whom, when, and for what purpose, when they present themselves as a gay in the public. In this context, "queer autonomy" is not something that already exists in society which any Thai, regardless of his or her class, can claim, enjoy, and benefit from. Much depends on their respective socio-economic locations and their ability to negotiate their subject positions within existing (and quite palpable) social divisions between the rich and the poor, and between Bangkok and the northeast and north provinces.

Stéphane Renneson's essay is on *kathoey* Muay Thai boxers while Serhat Ünaldi offers a general survey of the representation of *kathoeys* and gay men in recent Thai movies. Bret Farmer's article focuses on one particular movie, *The Love of Siam*, and Ronnappom Samakkeekarom and Pimpawun Boonmongkon's article is on gay internet chat rooms of Camfrog. Aren Aizura discusses the nature of gender reassignment clinics in Bangkok. Although these authors are describing contemporary issues, the descriptions provided by each article are rather loose, and open to conflicting interpretations. In proposing "vernacular queerness," Farmer's description, is ironically limited to the so-called "non-normative gender/sexual cultures" (p. 87) and thus his analysis of *The Love of Siam* primarily concentrates on the movie's two (gay) main characters, Mew and Tong. It gives short shrift to their familial relationships, which are just as important as their individual identies in shaping the discourse of Thai queer culture. In their article on Camfrog, Samakkeekarom and Boonmongkon discuss the issue of "power structure" between room/server owner, DJs, and users/members/performers. They mention that "in general rooms who did not want to show their bodies and faces had the least power." While it may be true that by not showing their bodies and faces, these members choose to have limited interaction with other members, it does not automatically mean that their power to negotiate for a meaningful conversation is any lesser than those who do otherwise. After all, power relations are socially flexible and, especially in the virtual world, constantly changing. In discussing biopolitics in gender reassignment surgery, Aizura touches on the issue of the "racialization" of hospital services, with a strong preference towards non-Thai white patients, but the article provides not much information on the background of the non-Thai patients (aside from two interviews with one Thai and one Vietnamese Australian trans-women). The article overlooks the presence of Japanese patients (whose numbers have increased over the years, and many of whom go to the Preecha Aesthetic Institute to have surgery) in the global marketing of this service.

Three articles offer reflections on changing notions of being "different" in a specific Thai context. Alex Au's essay provides a story of the development of Singapore's gay scene that owes its makeup to Bangkok. Megan Sinnott describes the production of discourse on sexuality as developed by feminist lesbian organizations in Thailand, and Sam Winter's article is on *de-facto* social barriers transgender people often face in their daily life. Although enjoyable to read, these articles have little academic significance in capturing the undercurrent of the change itself. Sinnott's discussion does not cover how the discourse is accepted within larger society outside the LGBT community, a limitation that may lead readers to conclude that changes in the discourse are solely limited to lesbian activists, a number of academics, and policy makers. The fact that most of the members of the feminist lesbian organizations she describes, Anjaree and Lesla, are urban middle class women shows the need for a critical survey of the silent majority to understand the latter's sexual identities and the discourses they have developed. Winter's descriptions are based on quotations from earlier studies (or, second hand reports), hardly a deep analysis of the cultural and intellectual roots of the social norms that give impetus to the exclusion of transgender people in Thailand.

Notwithstanding these problems, three articles (Nikos Dacanay on gay sauna in Bangkok, Ben Murtagh on Indonesian gay novel, and Douglas Sanders on the rainbow lobby in Thai politics) stand out in this collection by providing thick description that enables readers to imagine Bangkok's queer culture. Their findings, however, do not place Bangkok in the center, as the title of the book would have it. In the cultural struggle to maintain the liberal image it has cultivated in the 1990s, Bangkok in fact is slowly losing its ground in competition with other metropolitan cities in East Asia region. An increase in the number of commercial gay venues in the city does not always indicate the rise of Bangkok as the "gay capital" of Southeast Asia. In this regards, Nikos Dacanay's article can be read as a sober account of the (re)development of the city's "pleasure space" (Askew 2002) for (primarily global and middle class) gay consumers. It discusses how market forces are shaping the development of commercial gay venues and makes a forceful argument for the fact that the consumption of desire is closely knitted with the vexing issue of class. Class based-preference for certain gay venues shows that the aspiration of middle-class gays for "cosmopolitanism" (in terms of appearances and life-style) is just too costly and unreasonable for the less well-off majority. This "diversity" of class backgrounds among gay men is not fairly represented in the public imagery of so-called "gay life," which routinely affirms (and reproduces) middle-class assumptions and lifestyles as its model. Although there are some venues catering to working class gays, they reside in the margins and have yet to offer any form of alternative culture. In a developing country like Thailand, visibility is itself a class privilege, and Thai-language magazines are more often than not enthusiastic agents of this middle-class-image reproduction. Ben Murtagh's article also attests to how the liberal image of Bangkok does not always correspond with reality, as it is often reinforced by global circuits and economies of desire. In the novel *Lelaki terindah*, Bangkok is idealized as a

touristy "gay heaven," but the platonic relationship at the heart of the novel is used by the author (Andrei Aksana) to illuminate the constraints gay men often face in the author's own hometown of Jakarta. Douglas Sander's article on the rainbow lobby during the time of political transition is also an important piece that clearly shows how accommodating *kathoeys* legally has proven to be a Sisyphean task: despite the public's relative acceptance of LGBT issues (at least, for economic reasons), the old guards are still busy enforcing "normative sexuality" among the larger society.

Discrepancies within the realities of Bangkok described in the articles; cookie-cutter analysis imposed by some of the authors onto their subjects; and the proposal put forward by the editor—all of these may indeed provide a way of understanding how and where the project of discovering the non-Western experiences is taking place. But ought non-Western experiences to be theorized in the same way as Western ones? What insights can these non-Western experiences yield for academic conceptualization without remaining parasitical on Western categories or frameworks of thought? If the development of queer theory in the West owes something to the fertile ideas from postmodern and feminist critical thought, how useful are they for understanding gender construction in non-Western societies, especially in the case of Thailand? Ramming postmodern concepts onto empirical descriptions of Thailand's queer culture may have proven useful for Western scholars who can easily relate to their own theory while making sense of their objects of study in terms of their own metropolitan experiences and language. However, further scrutiny is needed to see if this is the best way to understand non-Western experiences, or even to represent them in ways that will be meaningful for non-Western audiences. It is not that *Queer Bangkok* overlooks the problematical nature of the theoretical framework in conceptualizing its project, but it seems that the editor and some of the authors have not yet found an alternative frame of reference. They are thus relying on postmodern vocabularies to complicate their studies based on a generally accepted social theory. In that respect, *Queer Bangkok* serves as a caveat on the necessity of careful bottom-up analysis rather than mere importation of metropolitan jargon into our research on gender and sexuality in Asia.

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The Floracrats: State-Sponsored Science and the Failure of the Enlightenment in Indonesia

ANDREW GOSS

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011, 264 p.

In *The Floracrats: State-Sponsored Science and the Failure of the Enlightenment in Indonesia*, Andrew Goss examines in sharp and engaging detail the relationship between science, state and society in modern Indonesia. Goss follows the professional careers of state-sponsored naturalists or "Floracrats" as they sought to expand their scientific knowledge and authority and examines how their Enlightenment vision to achieve societal transformation through science became absorbed or "co-opted" by the colonial and postcolonial state. In carefully researched chapters spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, Goss argues that the integration of scientists into the state bureaucracy has characterized the enduring failure of the Enlightenment in Indonesia.

This book, while part of a blossoming literature on the history of science and technology in modern Southeast Asia, represents an important departure from existing work in its attempt to address the legacy of colonial science for postcolonial societies[1] (Moon 2007; Mrázek 2002; Pols 2009). In contrast to recent studies that examine the political uses of science to reinforce authoritarian regimes or to fashion the self-identity of nationalists who protested against them, Goss instead focuses his work around the question of why science became so readily available for the colonial and postcolonial state's use and how this relationship imposed critical limits on scientific innovation.[2] This work therefore serves as an important contribution not only to the history of science in Indonesia but to its social and political history as well.

Across a series of richly detailed episodes, Goss analyzes how science, particularly botany and natural history, developed into a tool of the Indonesian state. Most interesting are the chapters on the establishment of the Buitenzorg Gardens and their transformation into a scientific empire under the careful stewardship of naturalist Melchior Treub. Treub was tasked with the challenge of both promoting the international status of the Gardens and making the plant and animal collections at Buitenzorg "legible" to colonial bureaucrats who sought to affect more practical changes at home. In the chapter on "Quinine Science," Goss explores the emergence of this notion that scientists prove their value to colonial capitalism by creating economically useful knowledge.

1) This focus on the history of science and technology is especially striking among recent scholarship on Indonesia. See References for more detail.
2) For example, see Warwick Anderson and Hans Pols (2012).